

VZCZCXYZ0002
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHWN #0690/01 3261751
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 211751Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6892
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRIDGETOWN 000690

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/21/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [XL](#)
SUBJECT: ST. VINCENT OPPOSITION IN A DISMAL STATE

Classified By: CDA D. Brent Hardt Reason 1.4 (b/d)

Summary

¶1. (C) St. Vincent's New Democratic Party (NDP) is dispirited and mired in self pity, and appears incapable -- despite potential openings -- to mount any serious opposition to Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves. The party's lackluster leadership has had difficulty targeting their criticisms and making them stick. With money scarce and Prime Minister Gonsalves running circles around the opposition in parliament, the NDP is unlikely to be able to mount a serious challenge unless former PM Sir Jams Mitchell comes out of retirement. End summary.

NDP Adrift

¶2. (C) Lacking strong leadership and a clear sense of direction, the NDP is a party adrift. Opposition leader Arnhim Eustace, while undeniably intelligent and acutely aware of the problems facing the country, is a singularly uncharismatic and uninspiring figure who is unable to translate his technocratic expertise into any kind of viable or sustained political activity. Without a stronger leader, the NDP's influence will be muted. Sir James Mitchell, the previous Prime Minister and former leader of the NDP, has not communicated with the NDP about a return to politics and the NDP leadership is not necessarily excited about a potential homecoming. In a September conversation with the Ambassador, he privately criticized the party for being unable to seize openings given them by Prime Minister Gonsalves' personal scandals, political overreaches, recent associations with Iran, and huge expenditures on an unnecessary new airport. Neither confirming nor denying a return to the political stage, Mitchell stated "timing is everything" and "you need to let the demand build up, you win these things before they begin," suggesting that if the climate is not ripe for a NDP win, he will not return for the next election.

Their Man Friday

¶3. (C) One glimmer of hope for the NDP may be Godwin Friday. Friday is currently serving in the parliament representing a constituency from the Grenadine Island of Bequia. An articulate, well respected and slightly more charismatic Canadian-trained lawyer, he has a solid grasp of the challenges ahead. During meetings with poloff, other NDP leaders including Eustace valued his opinion and often turned to Friday for answers. Friday does not share the same apocalyptic view of the future other members of the NDP have. Friday is also the NDP leader best equipped to deal with the press, and he has a good analytical grasp of both domestic

political and economic issues. Aside from Eustace, Friday appears to be the only other real option for leadership in the NDP as currently constructed. However, as Friday represents the same district Mitchell would contest, he is likely in no hurry to welcome the former PM back into the fold. And, without an infusion of strong, new (or returning) leadership and political savvy, the NDP and its nearly-empty war chest is ill-equipped to generate a strong election campaign.

Voter Fraud Conspiracy Theory

¶4. (C) Having failed to make political hay out of two rape charges brought against the PM or the controversial new relationship with Iran, NDP leaders are currently pinning their hopes on an election conspiracy theory with Prime Minister Gonsalves at the center. There are no absentee ballots in St. Vincent, and the law requires a voter's name be removed from the registered voters list after living abroad for five years. Only Vincentians living in St. Vincent may vote and must be present to do so. In October 2009, St. Vincent and the Grenadines will celebrate its 30th anniversary of independence, and the Gonsalves administration is encouraging all Vincentians to return home for the celebration. The opposition believes Gonsalves plans to call elections either just before or just after the 30th independence celebration. Skirting the election laws, he will maximize his support by allowing returning Vincentians to vote. In such a small country, elections can be decided by just a few votes. In the last election, the NDP lost three parliamentary seats by 14, 29, and 36 votes. With only 15 seats in parliament, every vote counts.

¶5. (C) Gonsalves has so far shown an impressive ability to weather scandal and controversy, and likely has little to fear and much to gain from moving forward with swelling the voter rolls for the next election. Most recently, he allegedly used government and private connections to bribe his second alleged rape victim with cash, property and scholarships, effectively ending any potential future case against him. Gonsalves is quick to threaten law suits against his accusers and anyone willing to broadcast or print their statements. He also cunningly sidesteps any political landmines by redirecting attention to anything but his own misdeeds, turning virtually every economic or political issue into a referendum on party loyalty -- which, through his strong charisma and blatant populist programs, he wins handily. His populist refutation of the Ambassador's show of concern over new relations with Iran garnered support not just within St. Vincent, but also among the old-school anti-American elements elsewhere in CARICOM. And, when all else fails, he pulls out his persecution arguments, claiming he is being targeted by drug smugglers for his hard stand (sic) against narco-trafficking.

Comment

¶6. (C) Unless the opposition can reorganize itself, which seems improbable in the short term, Prime Minister Gonsalves will likely have an easy time when he calls elections, which are constitutionally due by December 2010. The NDP leadership appears woeful and lost, lacking ideas on how to move forward and mount a serious challenge to Gonsalves. Most embassy contacts believe elections will take place in 2009, at least one year prior to the end of the current term. The only wild card in the deck is Sir James Mitchell, who has the experience and, more importantly, the gravitas and personal charisma to make a fight of it. So far, though, the cagey ex-PM has held his cards close, hinting to us that he might be interested in getting back into the game but noting that the time is not yet ripe for him to challenge for the NDP leadership and wage a campaign against a well-organized and well-financed ULP.

HARDT